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A NOTE ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VITALISM

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No less important than the rational and empirical investigation of the metaphysical validity of mechanism on the one hand and vitalism on the other, but quite as fundamental, is a satisfactory answer to the question as to why men believe in mechanism and vitalism. Nor is the answer simple, since human nature is so complex that the wisest of men understand it only in part.

That it is essentially a question of human nature is shown by the fact that the issue reaches an acute form in the empirical study of the mind-body relation, and by the tenacity with which the human race as a whole has clung to a vitalistic interpretation of perplexing problems of its physical and social environment. Though the nature of the nerve impulses continues to be the subject of discussion among scientists, it is not so difficult to agree that the transition from external physical stimuli to physiological nerve impulses may be described in mechanistic terms. But the transmutation of physical and physiological stimuli into sense perception — atmospheric vibrations into a largo or a symphony, for instance, or vibrations of the ether into a Mona Lisa or an Ecce Homo — is quite another issue; for the data of immediate experience seem to indicate the presence of something more than causal relation as viewed and interpreted by the onlooker, even though he be a trained scientific observer.

The deep-seated tendency of a man to espouse vitalism is evidenced not only in its historic continuity but in its present-day manifestations — in the attitude of the men at the front during the past months, for example, and of their relatives and close friends at home. Whatever a man may be in the grill-room or at golf, he is quite different in the presence of an impending crisis. In seasons of great danger, difficulty and distress, he puts his trust in vitalism, not infrequently of an extremely naïve type. Though the innermost motives and purposes of men are not readily exhibited, it is entirely probable that at unguarded moments all men are vitalists. The

disquisitions of scientist and philosopher, and the disputations of scholars carry a large measure of conviction with them as to the adequacy of the mechanistic point of view; and after the individual has left the laboratory and turned his back on the philosopher's closet, he acts like a vitalist in the office, home, church, and club.

Were man merely intellect, and his interests always only logical, his belief would naturally be mechanistic. The intellect has an insatiable appetite for logical categories, rigorously applied causal relations, and a fabric of knowledge closely woven without any loose ends. The facts of observation, especially of scientific procedure, are classified and organized into systematic wholes, and any loose ends are carefully tucked away with the hope of disposing of them later. Their presence, while a bit disconcerting, does not give rise to any lack of confidence in the ultimate solvability in terms of cause and effect relationships of the most intricate and involved problems.¹

To get at the heart of the issue, it is important to uncover and exhibit the foundations of belief and human action, for a clear understanding of motives is the *sine qua non* of an adequate apprehension not only of human purpose and endeavor, but of the growing institutions of society. The very fact that certain institutions have survived from the dawn of the historic period to the present and in all probability existed in the pre-historic ages, and that they today claim a large portion of the time and energy of groups from savagery up to the most enlightened peoples, lends plausibility to the belief that they are functionally established as fundamental to human life, and that the underlying involved concepts, explicit or implicit, possess a validity which should not be countermanded until the institutions themselves show signs of decay. That vitalism is one of these notions need hardly be stated.

On the other hand, the historic development of attitudes whose realization and unfolding have greatly facilitated man's control of his physical and social environment suggests the presence of something essential to the analysis of the world order. Successful methods of control may well point to the validity of the notions out of which they arise. No one will seriously question the dominating position of the mechanistic point of view in invention and the formulation of the laws of

¹ Vide Henry Fairfield Osborn: *The Origin and Evolution of Life*. (New York, 1917.)

nature. Since marvellous effects have been wrought and are still being produced before our eyes in laboratory and workshop, the principles underlying the various techniques are invested with unusual prestige. Their successful application to ever-widening fields of thought and endeavor quite naturally gives rise to the conclusion that the mechanistic point of view will drive vitalistic conceptions before it until it reigns supreme. Quite in harmony with this, the standpoint of modern mechanism may be summed up as follows: All the phenomena of the world of human experience, not only those of physics and chemistry, but those of biology, psychology, religion, the moral life, and the social and economic relations of life, lend themselves to a mechanistic interpretation. The only hindrance in the way of actually doing so is man's ignorance and inefficiency in the presence of extremely complex situations.

The antithesis between the two points of view thus stated is sharply drawn, resolving itself in the minds of many into Kant's third conflict of the transcendental ideas; for however empirical mechanism is at the beginning, it becomes speculative as soon as it rises above the solid foundation of observed facts. And yet it is not necessary to state the relation between the two in this way.

By its very nature mechanism is the standpoint of the observer viewed as observer, while vitalism represents in last analysis the attitude of the agent. *A* is seated comfortably in his home reading the evening paper; the doorbell rings and he goes to the door to see who has come. The observer *B* says he performs the act because the doorbell rang, and if he is in a scientific frame of mind he attributes it to the activity aroused by the stimulus in specific segments of the nervous system, interpreting the act as a whole in terms of physico-chemical reaction. *A* himself in offering an explanation quite naturally takes the agent's point of view, saying that the act was voluntary on his part, and that in this instance, as on previous occasions, he could have disregarded the stimulus.

The case cited lends itself readily to the interpretation of the observer on the one hand and of the agent on the other, for both observer and agent are involved; but one and the same person may quite readily take the position of both. This is especially true of men who have undergone some scientific training—who in moments of investigation usually take the calculating point of view of the observer, but who are nevertheless prone to assume the agent's position when confronting

very perplexing situations. The more thoroughly the mind becomes imbued with the principles of science and methods of scientific investigation are reduced to habitual reactions, the more likely the individual will be to eliminate anthropomorphic conceptions from vitalism. Introduced in the first place almost spontaneously, advanced to the position of teleological explanation, vitalism becomes more refined and attenuated until there is nothing left but teleology.

The modern concept of evolution may serve to illustrate this last phase of vitalism. Within the order of nature, cause and effect are unquestionably operative, for specific applications of general laws may readily be exhibited; but the whole is vastly more than a mere juxtaposition of parts. Temporal sequence of processes so that one complements the other, coöperation of general laws so that systematization takes place, profound mutations most auspiciously arranged to facilitate adaptation are included in the whole. That they mystify the scientific investigator need not be said. He may put them aside for future reference, believing that they may finally be taken up in a mechanistic explanation of the whole order as such; or perplexed beyond description he may take the point of view of the agent, ejecting perhaps unwittingly his own experience of purposeful action into the process and asserting the presence of teleology—not crude anthropomorphic planning but vitalism as attenuated as the entelechy of Driesch or the *élan vital* of Bergson.

A statement of this attitude is found in the article, "A Biologist's Religion," published in a recent number of the *Monist*. The author, after specifying various failures of mechanism in attempted explanation of biological issues, goes on to say: "The crux of the whole matter is here: whether we feel safer in trusting to the pronouncements of biased observers, or in being guided by finer intuitions. Since the intellect is only equipped to grapple with the things of the intellect, we cannot rightly expect it to do justice to itself in matters entirely outside its domain. Those of simple faith, unhampered by intellectual trappings, unaffected by dictation of historically authorized formulas, are best fitted to appreciate a process having nothing in common with a restricted human intellect."²

This pronouncement of a modern biologist may be compared

² Walter Sonneberg: A Biologist's Religion, *Monist*, XXVIII, pp. 567-585.

with the experience of an oriental statesman and scholar, Wang Yang-ming, who in his search for truth undertook to investigate the bamboo. He first encouraged a friend to make the attempt; but as the latter fell ill after three days of intense application, he turned to the task himself. "I myself undertook to carry on the investigation," he said. "Day and night I worked, unable to understand the principles of the bamboo, until after seven days I also became ill because of having wearied and burdened my thoughts." His enlightenment came while he was living, an exile, among savage tribes. "My nature is sufficient," he said at that time, "I was wrong in looking for principles in things. To understand things one must investigate and understand the mind. Intuition is the door and the way to all real knowledge."³ Needless to say, the Chinese philosopher, like the modern intuitionist, was a thorough-going vitalist.

The oriental scholar may appear more primitive in his method of reaching the conclusion, but the technique is essentially the same wherever the individual espouses vitalism under whatever name it may be: he ejects it from his own nature into the order of nature. Subsequently, there is ample opportunity for the intellect to make its influence felt by working the belief over according to the forms of the understanding; but not to the extent that the camouflage is imperceptible to the initiated. The penetrating effect of the intellectual life into vitalistic beliefs varies in different persons, and in the same person at different times. In any case vitalism is associated preëminently with crises and for this reason the mature mind and old age are not exempt.

But the psychology of vitalism calls for a more thorough-going and incisive analysis of the situation. Held by all classes and conditions of men in all times and places, this interpretation, the psychologist suspects, has its roots deep down in the foundations of belief and actions, seeming to spring up out of human nature as vegetation grows from the earth. The question, thus viewed, is essentially one of motives, for the beliefs, actions, and institutions of human life take their origin from this matrix and have their being in this realm. Thus, if other motives are substituted for those now effective, beliefs, actions, and institutions will be profoundly altered; and if it should transpire that by a *coup de maître* science succeeded in

³ *The Philosophy of Wang Yang-ming* (Chicago, 1916), pp. 177f.; also p. 13.

eliminating all but reflection as a controlling motive of man, human life would be transformed into something very different from what it now is. Old institutions would all go, and we would before long have a new world.

It is among the congenital characteristics of human nature that the social psychologist seeks for the explanation of the tenacity with which man holds to vitalism; and among these none are of greater importance than the instincts and their corresponding emotions. These tendencies to act represent, structurally, imbedded pathways in the nervous system, and functionally, inherited effective adaptations. That they severally and conjointly have profound social implications is what would be expected, for in the environment of the various species of higher animals social aspects are outstanding. They had to adapt themselves not only to animals of the same species, but to those of other species with which they came into contact. In the instance of the *genus homo* conditions were in this regard not materially different: only those survived who adjusted themselves to the social environment.

An examination of the instincts as we find them today fully justifies any expectation regarding their social character. They have social implications; some more than others, but all of them in a substantial measure. McDougall's list, if the food instinct is added, is as satisfactory as any: food, sex, fear, repulsion, pugnacity, curiosity, self-abasement, self-assertion, parental instinct, gregariousness, instinct of acquisition and instinct of construction.⁴ Considered from the neurological point of view, each consists of affective, central, and effective processes. The affective processes of the instincts by the very nature of the environment have throughout the history of the human race been largely aroused to activity by other human beings and by animals; and the effective or motor processes have been directed toward mediating certain social effects. The central processes include the emotional and ideational aspects of the instincts. Least subject to change of the processes, they constitute the foundation upon which man has constructed his notions of the order of nature.

As long as the inherited tendencies mediate control smoothly and efficiently, the attention remains spontaneous; but when they fail to function thus, it rises to the highest level. The interest at the beginning, phylogenetically and ontogenetically considered, is immediate; and in this condition attitudes are

⁴ William McDougall: *Social Psychology*, Ch. II.

not accompanied by ideas. It is quite obvious, however, that these earlier manifestations of attitudes are vitalistic in implication rather than mechanistic. But frustrated instinct is the matrix in which ideas arise, and unusual experiences are the first ones that attract attention. Consciousness of self and consciousness of others are born together; the inanimate, lifeless thing, dominated by causal relationships, is a much later product.

Historically, the process whereby physical objects were distinguished from those that are social must have been long and laborious, for the Ionian physicists of the sixth century B.C. were hylozoists, thus showing that they did not recognize the difference, and even the atomist, Leucippus, clung to this belief. Early endeavors of human thought dealt with the unusual as opposed to the usual; no term for nature, much less for the "order of nature," is found among primitive peoples. The application of thought to the solution of unusual experiences first gave rise to vitalism; later rational and empirical investigation of the normal and usual experiences led to the acceptance of the mechanistic standpoint.

The conception of "mana" widely held in the Pacific region, "oudah" of the Pygmies, and "orenda" and "wakanda" of the American Indians, are convincing examples of incipient vitalistic tendencies of primitive man. These conceptions, while definitely held, are not fully formed concepts. They have in them more of the "projective" stage of the dialectic of personal development than of the "subjective" or ejective stages, constituting "a piece of subconscious philosophy," according to Marett.⁵ The connotation and denotation of "mana"—and similar terms from other regions—though somewhat indeterminate cover "all manifestations of mysterious, or supernatural, power in magic and religion alike."⁶ Insofar as control is supposed to be present, as in the black art, there may seem to be a bit of a suggestion of the appreciation of cause and effect; but analysis shows that when appeal is made to magic primitive man is dealing with unusual situations, and that the power invoked is much more closely akin to Tylor's animism than to the abstract causal relation of mechanism.

⁵ James Mark Baldwin: *Social and Ethical Interpretation* (New York, 1906), pp. 13f.; *Mental Development* (New York, 1915), pp. 319f.; also R. R. Marett: *The Threshold of Religion* (New York, 1914), p. 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

When "mana" crystallizes into a definite concept, it takes the form of animatism—life is ejected by the mind into the objects of nature, and they are regarded as living. Nothing is exempt from high heaven and the sacred mountain to the rock which is said to hold parental relation to the surrounding small stones. The only thing required is that the attention be drawn to them with sufficient force to elicit an explanation. Tylor's animism, involving the movement of separate spirits from one habitat to another, is but a further elaboration of the same tendency under the influence of striking psychical experiences.

Man is a social being at heart, not only through the inheritance of social tendencies, but as a result of the dominantly social factors in the development of his personality—suggestion, public opinion, and custom, for instance. Once begun, the impact of these agencies is well-nigh irresistible. Vitalism represents the adamant impression which these combined factors make upon his interpretation of his environment. Present everywhere in primitive life, the "call of the wild" carries over into all historic periods and all stages of culture above savagery. That it bears the marks of the emotions and the sentiments and thus is a phase of romanticism is quite obvious; but this fact only goes to show that there is a presumption in favor of its continuance in the future.

So long as the human being remains a human being, the little girl will continue to view her dolls not as so much cloth, sawdust, china, and hair skillfully combined to look like a human being, but as alive and as needing her attention and tender care; the man who barks his shin on a piece of furniture at night will consider the offending rocker, not as so much wood and glue, dead and lifeless, but as something living upon which to vent his anger; and the carpenter who strikes his thumb a hard blow will bless the hammer quite out of proportion to what he would if it were for him at the moment only a bit of steel with a handle attached. They are vitalists at heart, and when off guard certain stimuli arouse responses clearly indicative of it. When the trained observer finds organization, temporal sequence of development, configuration, adaptation, and unlimited power in the universe, and at the same time realizes how ineffectually the intellect has been able to comprehend them, and how limited has been man's control of natural forces, it is not surprising that admiration and awe should be stimulated—and not infrequently reverence. But these are *par excellence* sentiments with vitalistic

implication. What wonder, then, that many scientists are by confession vitalists?

The question of vitalism and mechanism from the point of view of psychology does not resolve itself into an antithesis; not "either, or," but "both, and" expresses the relation between the two. Man is both vitalist and mechanist. The instinctive, emotional part of his nature, abundantly supported by age-hallowed custom and the organization he finds in nature, influences him to hold a vitalistic, teleological point of view; the intellect with its concepts and categories, adjusted to serve as an instrument of adaptation to novel features of his environment, and to order and interpret the facts of sense perception, makes him espouse mechanism. In some the instincts and emotions are overpowering in their influence at all times; others have through long training in scientific research given the intellect a dominant place; still others maintain a sort of equilibrium between the two. The proportion of vitalism and mechanism present in the beliefs of any individual may be interpreted in the light of these facts.